# BOYS’ ACHIEVEMENT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

**A Summary of Ofsted Report –** HMI 1659, *July 2003*

1. **INTRODUCTION**

When boys enter secondary school they are already well behind girls in English, although they achieve marginally better than girls in mathematics. Except in a small number of schools, this ‘gap’ in attainment does not close during the secondary years and boys continue to achieve less well than girls in KS3 tests and GCSE exams. In 1996 Ofsted published a report entitled *The Gender Divide* which highlighted this gap. This report follows up some of the issues raised and identifies approaches used to raise boys’ attainment.

1. **MAIN FINDINGS**

**Improving achievement:**

* Improving the achievement of boys is a complex matter in which interlinked factors play important parts. They include a positive learning ethos, good teaching and classroom management, close monitoring of individuals and effective support for learning.
* These factors are significant in all schools, whether mixed or single-sex, maintained or independent, and are relevant to girls as well as boys. Senior managers play a crucial role in determining the most appropriate strategy for school improvement, based on close examination of the school situation and identification of the barriers to improving boys’ achievement.

**Ethos:**

* The relationship between the ethos of a school and the achievement of its pupils is close. Boys tend to respond well to an ethos that encourages and stimulates high standards, that engages their interest and commitment, and that insists on good behaviour and close partnership with parents.
* Boys perform better in schools which have a strong learning culture and sense of community, and which demonstrably value all pupils by celebrating their achievements and by treating them fairly and with respect. Extra-curricular activities make a significant contribution to boys’ views of school.
* The importance of a clearly defined disciplinary framework is especially marked for boys. Boys respond best when there is a consistent and fair-minded approach to discipline, backed up by effective pastoral systems and learning support.

**Teaching and classroom management:**

* Good teaching and classroom management are major factors in all pupils’ achievement. Features of good teaching include clear objectives, careful planning that builds on earlier learning, a variety of activities, a sprightly pace, materials that engage all pupils, questioning that promotes understanding, and the appropriate use of praise.
* Boys tend to respond well to teachers who set clear limits and high expectations, direct work strongly, show enthusiasm for their subjects, use humour and reward good work. There is evidence that boys are rather less inclined than girls to learn from indifferent teaching.
* Many of the schools visited in the survey have improved pupils’ performance through a whole-school focus on teaching and learning. The focus tends to involve greater use of formative assessment, attention to different learning styles, and structured teaching approaches or a mixed approach. The KS3 Strategy has been a catalyst for developments in these respects.
* Although there is nothing as clear-cut as a boys’ learning style, many schools have found certain approaches to be particularly helpful. For example, although many boys are willing to contribute orally, they can be helped to become more reflective in their replies. Their motivation can be enhanced by giving them greater access to computers for interactive learning or to help them improve the presentation of their work.
* Boys often respond better to lessons that have a clear structure and a variety of activities, including practical and activity-based learning, applications to real-life situations and an element of fun and competition. Many boys find it helpful to be given short-term targets and feedback that focuses on how they can improve.

**Strategies focussing on literacy:**

* In many schools, boys’ underachievement is associated with poor skills in the use of language, which is reflected in their performance in GCSE examinations in modern foreign languages, religious education and drama, as well as in English Language and literature. Boys achieve notably worse results than girls in National Curriculum English tests at KS2 and 3.
* Strategies involving intensive support on reading and writing, work on literacy across the curriculum and the careful selection of materials to include those that appeal to boys as well as girls, have often been effective in raising standards.

**Alternative curricula:**

* Disaffection is an issue in many maintained school. There is evidence that some students can be re-engaged in education through an alternative – generally vocational - curriculum. However, the benefits of vocational learning extend to many pupils and not just the disaffected.
* Inspections of work-based learning suggest that many boys respond well to the environment of a college or workplace, and that the benefits can sometimes spread to school work.

**Tracking and supporting pupils’ performance:**

* Effective schools gather and analyse pupil-level data, paying attention to gender and other dimensions. They make use of external benchmarks to compare the performance of pupils and groups with other schools and use internal benchmarks to compare pupil performance with that of previous cohorts. They use baseline data to set targets for pupils and departments that raise expectations, have tracking systems that quickly identify pupils and groups that are underperforming, and make timely interventions.
* Boys in particular seem to value individual attention and tend to work harder when they know they are being monitored closely. They respond well when given help to organise their coursework and to plan their revision. In schools where anti-learning peer pressure is a major barrier to boys’ achievement, close monitoring can give boys ‘an excuse to succeed’.
* Examples of effective support seen by inspectors include academic reviews by tutors, learning mentors, learning support units, study centres, homework clubs, revision classes, programmes of study skills, access to information and ICT, residential programmes and opportunities for work-related learning.

**Single-sex schools:**

* Boys and girls tend to achieve better GCSE results in single-sex schools than in mixed schools, but research suggests that factors such as school type, reputation, history and ethos are also significant.

**Organisation in mixed schools:**

* The effect of single-sex grouping in mixed schools is variable, with some marginal gains reported but other unsuccessful examples.
* Benefits arise from teachers’ deliberate control of seating and grouping arrangements and the planning of activities that encourage boys and girls to learn from each other.

1. **CONCLUSIONS**

Inspection evidence and research both suggest a number of promising strategies which, although interpreted in terms of boys’ achievement, in many respects are not gender-specific and differ little from implementing what is commonly agreed to be best practice. These may be summarised as follows:

* understanding the barriers to achievement in the school context and raising the expectations of staff, pupils and parents – this includes determining the factors leading to boys’ underachievement;
* making sure the school has strong ethos where pupils and staff show respect for each other and offer plenty of extra-curricular activities, thereby making the school a place where boys feel they belong;
* implementing behaviour and discipline policies firmly but equitably, with good pastoral support, so the school is a place where boys feel comfortable with learning;
* using staff development to raise awareness of pupils’ different learning styles and helping boys to organise their independent work by giving more frequent, shorter deadlines;
* improving the quality of teaching and classroom management, thus helping teachers to gain the respect and attention of boys;
* ensuring that assessment is followed by feedback that tells pupils what they have to do to improve standards, showing boys, in particular, specific ways to improve their work;
* monitoring pupils’ progress against benchmarks and targets, and intervening early so boys’ problems are addressed before they cause demotivation;
* increasing the range and extent of learning support available for pupils and tackling low self-esteem among boys by helping them with organisation;
* improving the standards of literacy, particularly among low-attainers;
* considering the match between pupils’ interests and aspirations, and offering courses that appeal to different types of learners, so catering for those boys who prefer practical to written work;
* encouraging teachers to organise pupil seating arrangements in ways that improve learning, recognising that some boys, particularly, find it difficult to concentrate when sitting with their friends.

**4. SUBJECT-RELATED STRATEGIES**

In good **English** lessons teachers:

* encouraged boys whose answers lacked depth because of their keenness to give instant replies, by encouraging them to take time to think and reflect;
* used oral work well as a prelude to most writing tasks, and used good examples from pupils’ work to illustrate how to improve their writing;
* used their thorough knowledge of texts to probe and question pupils’ responses;
* made effective use of writing frames and other scaffolding to help weaker pupils to interrogate text and draw conclusions, balancing this with the challenge to write independently, therefore removing support when it is no longer needed;
* gave boys specific information on their strengths and weaknesses through conscientious, detailed marking and feedback that recognises and values particular qualities in boys’ writing;
* explained and reiterated the lesson objectives and explicitly taught and reviewed vocabulary;
* made good use of texts and topics that were of interest to boys and girls – e.g., one lesson encouraged pupils to think of different film genres, including science-fiction, western, martial arts, action adventure, romance and horror. Displays of film posters included materials that interested boys and girls;
* often organised pupils into mixed groups of boys and girls, and pupils had to listen to each other and work together to gather information they needed;
* ensured that issues of interest to boys as well as girls were included in poetry and literature;
* encouraged pupils to plan and record their ideas using a variety of diagrams and charts and maintained a balance between writing used to aid thinking or study and the production of polished extended text.

The Ofsted report *Yes he can: schools where boys write well* identifies several factors that characterise the work of schools in which boys write well. For example:

* value is placed on diversity of style and approach in written work;
* teachers are knowledgeable and enthusiastic about language and are able to link oral work, reading and writing skilfully and explicitly;
* a good balance is maintained between support and independence;
* pupils are often given choice as to the content of their writing;
* efforts are made to make writing tasks purposeful;
* writing tasks are often tackled in stages, with feedback or review at each stage;
* pupils write frequently and at length developing stamina as writers, but they seldom rewrite long pieces unless for ‘publication’.

In effective **Mathematics** lessons:

* in many schools teachers are actively working on girls’ achievement. The best teaching shows awareness that some pupils learn more effectively from teaching styles not favoured by the teacher, and plans to ensure a good level of contribution, commitment and effort from both sexes;
* teachers with good subject knowledge used probing questioning and were able to get pupils to explain their reasoning. Some made particular efforts to show the relevance of mathematics to real life;
* good lessons were well structured, with the teacher making the learning objectives clear. Teachers often, but not universally, followed the style promoted by the KS3 Strategy;
* good lessons often involved a range of short and varied tasks, including practical work, structured investigations, games and puzzles and regular homework;
* some departments achieved good results through a modular approach to planning. In one City Technology College, the thorough and well-organised scheme of work is supported by unit guides for pupils that tell the pupils how the work will be developed, what they have to learn and do, and so help them to know where they stand;
* boys respond particularly well to the national mathematics challenges, which offer non-standard, multiple-choice questions that encourage deeper thought and risk-taking. These also provide an opportunity to celebrate achievement.

Inspectors observed some promising strategies in **science** departments:

* in some schools, the use of National Curriculum level descriptors helped pupils to improve. Other schools found that ICT helped with presentation and writing frames helped the organisation of weaker pupils’ coursework;
* one school found that boys in particular responded well to the use of competitions;
* the science department at one technology college held a 4-day ‘immersion’ programme at the beginning of Y11 during which students completed their GCSE coursework. This helped reduce the pressure on other subjects;
* the science department at one school undertook research relating to raising boys’ achievement. They focused particularly on boys with low KS3 levels, but above average non-verbal reasoning scores. They found that boys whose English was weak performed well on the modular science tests used in KS4, especially where multiple choice questions were used. They also noted that the boys performed better when they respected and ‘rated’ the teacher, and that needed to feel that they were achieving, but they often preferred praise to be given privately;
* in an arts college, pupils receive good support throughout the coursework process with intermediate targets and deadlines being specified. In science, criteria are shared with the pupils so that they know exactly how their work will be judged. Writing frames are commonly used to provide an initial structure as well as to support lower-attaining pupils.

Although they mainly observed lessons in the core subjects, inspectors occasionally visited **other subjects**. They found that:

* in one school where boys were doing better than girls in modern foreign languages boys made good use of ICT (CDs and interactive equipment) and enjoyed oral work. They also found that the use of National Curriculum level descriptors helped pupils improve in modern foreign languages;
* in a technology college, templates and the use of ICT helped boys to improve the tidiness and organisation of their coursework. The same college had made history lessons available online;
* boys improved in GCSE history in one school after the department introduced writing frames and moved to a non-coursework option.

Copies of the full document can be obtained from Ofsted Publications Tel. 07002 637833 or downloaded from the Ofsted website at: [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/)

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